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CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY.

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DESCRIPTORS- BEHAVIOR, *CONFORMITY, *GROUP BEHAVIOR, BEHAVIOR THEORIES, *SOCIAL ATTITUDES, SOCIAL INFLUENCES,

IN THIS STUDY, PROFESSOR ALLEN EMPLOYS TWO METHODS OF BREAKING GROUP CONSENSUS, AND HE MEASURES THE EFFECTS ON THE RESPONSES OF COLLEGE SUBJECTS TO BOTH OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE STIMULI. THE RESULTS SUGGEST THE NEED FOR MODIFICATION OF EXISTING THEORIES OF CONFORMITY BEHAVIOR. IN ADDITION, THESE RESULTS EMPHASIZE THE DIFFERENCES IN CONFORMITY OF MALES AND FEMALES. GROUP CONSENSUS WAS BROKEN EITHER BY A PARTNER AGREEING EXACTLY WITH THE SUBJECT (S) (SOCIAL SUPPORT) OR BY A DISSENTER GIVING A RESPONSE EVEN MORE INCORRECT THAN THE GROUP'S (EXTREME DISSENT). USING THE CRUTCHFIELD APPARATUS, 157 MALE AND FEMALE SS RESPONDED TO VISUAL, INFORMATION, AND OPINION ITEMS. RESULTS DISCLOSED THAT EXTREME DISSENT, IN COMPARISON WITH AN UNANIMOUS GROUP, SIGNIFICANTLY DECREASED CONFORMITY ON VISUAL AND INFORMATION BUT NOT ON OPINION ITEMS. SOCIAL SUPPORT SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCED CONFORMITY ON ALL THREE TYPES OF ITEMS FOR MALES, AND ON VISUAL AND INFORMATION ITEMS FOR FEMALES. THE RESULTS CAST DOUBT ON ASCH'S CONTENTION THAT BREAKING GROUP CONSENSUS, PER SE, IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN REDUCING CONFORMITY. (AUTHOR)

Technical Report No. 41

CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY

Vernon L. Allen and John M. Levine

Report from the Peer Group Pressures on Learning Project

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Madison, Wisconsin

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PREFACE

One major program of the Wisconsin R and D Center for Cognitive Learning is Program 1 which is concerned with fundamental conditions and processes of learning. This Program consists of laboratory-type research projects, each independently concentrating on certain basic organismic or situational determinants of cognitive learning but all united in the task of providing knowledge which can be effectively utilized in the construction of instructional systems for tomorrow's schools. Any complete study of the variables which influence human learning—whether in or out of the classroom—must ultimately consider social influences. Professor Allen and his associates are actively engaged in a research project directed towards the analysis of social determinants in the acquisition and retention of basic cognitive skills.

In this study Professor Allen employs two methods of breaking group consensus, and he measures the effects on the responses of college subjects to both objective and subjective stimuli. The results suggest the need for modification of existing theories of conformity behavior. In addition, these results emphasize the differences in conformity of males and females.

Harold J. Fletcher
Director, Program 1

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ABSTRACT

Group consensus was broken either by a partner agreeing exactly with *S* (Social Support) or by a dissenter giving a response even more incorrect than the group's (Extreme Dissent). Using the Crutchfield apparatus, 157 male and female *S*s responded to visual, information, and opinion items. Results disclosed that Extreme Dissent, in comparison with a unanimous group, significantly decreased conformity on visual and information but not on opinion items. Social Support significantly reduced conformity on all three types of items for males, and on visual and information items for females. The results cast doubt on Asch's contention that breaking group consensus, per se, is responsible for the effectiveness of Social Support in reducing conformity.

I
INTRODUCTION

A study by Asch (1951) demonstrated that group consensus is an important variable in the conformity situation: one person breaking group unanimity by giving the correct answer virtually eliminated conformity to the erroneous group. Though hardly negating the importance of these findings, close examination of Asch's research on group consensus reveals several shortcomings. First, the presence of a partner produced discrepant results in three reports: conformity varied from 6 percent (1951), to 9 percent (1955), to 13 percent (1952). Second, sex differences were not reported, leaving open to question the generalizability of results. Third, since tests of significance were not indicated, it is difficult to evaluate the findings. Finally, only one type of item, simple visual stimuli, was used. In spite of these limitations, however, Asch's basic findings have been substantiated by several subsequent studies which found that the presence of a partner agreeing with *S* did indeed reduce conformity (Edmond, 1962; Hardy, 1957; Kiesler, Zanna, and DeSalvo, 1966; Malof and Lott, 1962).

In offering a theoretical explanation for his results, Asch pointed out that two factors exist in the Social Support (partner) situation, either of which might be responsible for the dramatic reduction in conformity: (1) presence of a partner agreeing with *S* or (2) lack of group unanimity or consensus. On the basis of further experimental work, Asch (1955) concluded that merely breaking the group's unanimity was the major cause of conformity reduction in the Social Support situation.

Asch's general conclusion is, however, open to question. First, his findings may not apply to more subjective stimuli, such as opinions. Second, there was a confounding of degree of extremeness of the group norm across the two conditions on which Asch based his general conclusion. In the extreme dissent condition (dissenter answering even more incorrectly than the group), the group's answer was moderately incorrect on all pressure trials. But in the Social Support condition (dissenter giving popular or correct answers), the group's answer was moderately incorrect on one-half the pressure trials and extremely incorrect on the other half.

A later study by Allen and Levine (1966) made two improvements in Asch's procedure. First, the group norm was located at a constant position on a nine-point scale, rather than varying across conditions. Second, the range of stimulus content was increased by using information and opinion items in addition to visual perception items. Allen and Levine's results supported Asch only on the type of item that he used: for visual items, conformity was significantly reduced by both a social supporter (partner) and by a dissenter who gave responses more extreme than the group's. On opinion items, however, only the Social Support condition significantly decreased conformity; extreme dissent was relatively ineffective here. Results on opinion items, therefore, did *not* support Asch's general conclusion that merely breaking group consensus is the crucial variable in reducing conformity in the Social Support condition.

The present experiment is a modification of the Allen and Levine (1966) study. In the previous experiment, the social supporter gave the same popular or correct response to all group members on each item. Since there was variability in *S*s' private judgments on the stimuli, every *S* did not always receive "true" social support, i.e., agreement, from the dissenter. In the present experiment, on the other hand, the dissenter gave the exact answer with which each *S* privately agreed on each item. Subjects' private responses on the information and opinion items were ascertained prior to the experiment; later, in the group pressure situation, an apparatus modification enabled each *S* to receive his own private judgments from the social supporter. This procedure assured that each *S* perceived exact agreement between his own responses and those of the social supporter on all stimuli.

Allen and Levine (1966) suggested that the emotional comfort deriving from the presence of a partner was a crucial factor in reducing conformity on opinion items. In the present experiment, therefore, conformity reduction in the social support condition on opinion items should be even larger than in the previous study, since each *S* now has a "true" partner on all items. Providing a partner who always agrees with *S* might, in addition, produce a significant conformity decrease on information items. Although the presence of a partner did not reduce conformity significantly on information items in the Allen and Levine (1966) study, there is no theoretical basis for assuming that social support should affect information and visual items differently.

The present study also differs from the earlier Allen and Levine (1966) study in having a greater proportion of critical trials and, therefore, a higher level of social support. If social support provides reinforcement for independence, a greater proportion of social support trials should produce more independence from the group. It was expected that social support would substantially reduce conformity on visual, information, and opinion items, while extreme dissent would significantly decrease conformity only on visual and information items.

Finally, personality data were obtained from *S*s in the social support condition in an attempt to explain individual differences in acceptance of the partner's response.

II
METHOD

SUBJECTS

The subjects were 189 introductory psychology students (100 males and 89 females) at the University of Wisconsin. Data from 32 *S*s were discarded because of their knowledge of the experimental deception as assessed by a postexperimental questionnaire. A total of 157 *S*s remained, 79 males and 78 females. Subjects received credits applicable to their class grade for participating in the experiment. Five randomly chosen *S*s of the same sex were always tested together as a group.

APPARATUS

The apparatus used was a Crutchfield-type electrical signaling device (Crutchfield, 1955). It consisted of five adjacent booths containing signal lights and 9 answer switches, a master control panel in an adjoining room, a slide projector operated by remote control, and a projection screen. The apparatus enabled *E* to simulate group responses to questions projected on the screen, so that *S*s believed they saw true responses of one another.

PROCEDURE

Seated in the five booths, *S*s were instructed to make accurate judgments on perceptual, information, and opinion questions projected on the screen. Subjects were told that signal lights in their booths indicated responses of the other persons in the group and that each *S* answered in one of the five response positions. During four practice trials *S*s saw true responses of one another and called out their answers aloud so that all could verify that the lights correctly indicated other *S*s' responses.

During the actual experiment, lights in all booths were controlled by *E*. Rather than one member of the group answering in each of the five positions, all *S*s answered last (fifth). The first four responses were simulated by *E* to agree or disagree with *S*s' private judgments.

At the completion of the experiment, *S*s filled out a questionnaire designed to ascertain emotional reactions, attitudes toward the dissenter, and perceived competence of the group. A careful debriefing followed. Approximately one month later, *S*s in the social support condition completed a two-part questionnaire assessing dependency.[1] Care was taken so that *S*s would not associate this questionnaire with the experiment.

STIMULI

The 30 items used in this experiment were chosen from a series developed by Tuddenham, Macbride and Zahn (1956). The items were of three types: (1) Visual perception items required judgment of relationships among visual stimuli. For instance, *S* had to determine which of nine rectangles was square. Each of the alternative responses corresponded to a number below one of the panel switches. (2) Information items dealt with relatively simple factual questions. For example, "In thousands of miles, how far is it from San Francisco to New York?" Each alternative

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[1]The Self-Identification Form measures the following personality variables: Leadership, Impulsiveness, Intellectual Interest, Aloofness, Self-Depreciation, and Tension. The Social Orientations Scale measures Independence-Autonomy, Social Dependency, Directiveness, and Sociability. Both questionnaires were developed by Borgatta to assess different types of dependency discussed in the personality literature. The Self-Identification Form has received extensive validation work (Borgatta, 1965), while the Social Orientations Scale is still in the developmental stage.

was a number from one to nine, corresponding to one of the switches. (3) Opinion items consisted of such statements as, "Most young people get too much education" and "I cannot do anything well." These items were answered by using one of the nine labels below the switches ranging from "Very Strongly Agree" to "Very Strongly Disagree."

Of the 30 items used, 18 were critical, or group pressure. items—six each of visual, information, and opinion items balanced over the series. The remaining 12 stimuli, 4 of each type, were neutral items. On these filler items, the simulated group gave popular or correct answers in all conditions.

STIMULATED GROUP NORM

On critical items, responses of the simulated group were placed at the 95th percentile of responses given by a standardization group answering alone. For information and opinion items, the standardization group was 300 introductory psychology students who had filled out questionnaires in class. For visual items, the standardization group was introductory psychology students tested by Tuddenham, Macbride, and Zahn (1956).

DESIGN

The 3 x 2 x 3 analysis of variance design included the following factors: Condition (Control, Social Support, Extreme Dissent), Sex of *S* (Male, Female), and Type of Item (Visual, Information, Opinion).

In two experimental conditions, Social Support and Extreme Dissent, one person, answering fourth in the group of five, dissented from the erroneous responses of the three other *S*s on the critical items. Responses of the three *S*s who answered first, second, and third remained constant across all conditions.

In the Social Support condition, each *S* saw person four give a response which *S* thought was correct. This was accomplished by modifying the Crutchfield apparatus so that *E* could present any one of the nine response alternatives in position four to each *S* independently. Using questionnaires *S*s had filled out in class earlier, *E* could simulate person four's answer so that it exactly agreed with each *S*'s judgment on the information and opinion items. For visual items, person four gave modal responses of the Tuddenham, Macbride, and Zahn (1956) standardization group. (There was little variability around these modal answers in the standardization group.)

In the Extreme Dissent condition, person four responded even more incorrectly than the erroneous group. The dissenter's response was always at least two switches beyond the simulated group, toward the more incorrect answers: in nearly 50% of the cases, the dissenter was three switches beyond the group.

In the Control condition, person four gave answers exactly agreeing with the first three group members. Here, then, there was no dissenter; all four simulated *S*s agreed on all items.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

For each *S* a mean conformity score was computed separately for visual, information, and opinion items. Mean conformity scores were calculated by summing the algebraic differences between initial responses and responses given in the group situation and dividing by the number of items used. (For information and opinion items, initial scores were obtained from questionnaires; for visual items, modal responses of the Tuddenham et al. (1956) standardization group were used.)

III
RESULTS

PERCEPTION OF DISSENT

Success of the experimental manipulation was determined by the accuracy of *S*s' perception of the dissenter's response in the Social Support and Extreme Dissent conditions. Data were based on responses to a postexperimental questionnaire. Table 1 shows percentage of *S*s in each condition who identified person four as the individual who "frequently agreed" with them. Data indicated that more *S*s in the Social Support condition (96%) correctly perceived the presence of a partner than in the Extreme Dissent (15%) or Control (0%) conditions. Difference among conditions was significant at less than the .01 level ($\chi^2 = 118.53$).

Percentage of *S*s in each condition who identified person four as often dissenting from the group is also shown in Table 1. Difference among the conditions was again significant at less than the .01 level ($\chi^2 = 74.07$). A larger percentage of *S*s in the Extreme Dissent condition (73%) correctly identified person four as often disagreeing with the group than in either the Social Support (17%) or Control (0%) conditions.

Table 1. Perception of the dissenter

Condition	N	% of *S*s Perceiving Person Four Agreeing with Them	% of *S*s Perceiving Person Four Disagreeing with Group
Control	53	0	0
Social Support	49	96	17
Extreme Dissent	55	15	73

In summary, most *S*s in the Social Support condition reported that the dissenter agreed with them, while most *S*s in the Extreme Dissent condition perceived that the dissenter disagreed with the group. Control *S*s did not perceive that one group member disagreed with the others. These results demonstrate the success of the experimental manipulations.

CONFORMITY

Table 2 presents results of the analysis of variance conducted on mean conformity scores. Both the Conditions and Items main effects were significant at less than the .01 level. Moreover, the Conditions x Items Interaction was significant at less than the .10 level.

Table 2. Analysis of variance of mean conformity scores

Source	df	MS	F
Conditions (A)	2	7.51	16.19**
Sex of *S* (B)	1	.83	1.78
A x B	2	.79	1.71
Error (a)	151	.46	
Items (C)	2	1.45	6.30**
A x C	4	46	2.02*
B x C	2	.39	1.67
A x B x C	4	20	89
Error (b)	302	.23	

*p < .10
**p < .01

Mean conformity scores for the three types of items in the Control Social Support, and Extreme Dissent conditions are presented in Table 3. Inspection of overall condition means indicates that the significant Condition effect is attributable to conformity reduction in the Social Support and Extreme Dissent conditions, compared to the Control. The Duncan New Multiple Range Test (Edwards, 1963) showed that overall conformity in both the Social Support (.47) and Extreme Dissent (.53) conditions was significantly lower than in the Control condition (.88). The significant Items effect, however, cannot be meaningfully evaluated since differences in variability, difficulty, and susceptibility to group influence exist among the three types of items.

It appears that the significant Conditions x Items Interaction was due to the differential effectiveness of extreme dissent in reducing conformity on objective versus subjective material. On visual items, *S*s in the Social Support and Extreme Dissent conditions conformed significantly less (.40 and .47 respectively) than Controls (.97). Similarly, on information items, conformity was significantly lower in both the Social Support (.43) and Extreme Dissent (.42) conditions than in the Control (.78). On subjective opinion items, however, only Social Support (.59) significantly reduced conformity compared to the Control condition (.89); Extreme Dissent produced a slight, though nonsignificant, decrease (.72).

Although a significant Conditions x Items x Sex interaction was not obtained, inspection reveals that the data warrant further analysis. On objective items (visual and information), results for males and females were very similar in the Control condition. Social Support and Extreme Dissent also significantly reduced conformity on visual and information items equally for both sexes. On subjective opinion items, however, male and female data diverge. Mean conformity in the Control condition was much lower for females (.76) than for females (1.02), a result opposite typical findings (Tuddenham, 1958; Beloff, 1958). For males, conformity was significantly less in the Social Support condition than in the Control (.48 vs. 1.02), while conformity showed a nonsignificant decrease (.74) in the Extreme Dissent condition. For females, on the other hand, neither Social Support (.70) *nor* Extreme Dissent (.70) significantly reduced conformity compared to the Control (.76). These data suggest, then, that neither a "true" partner nor an Extreme Dissenter liberated female *S*s from group influence on opinion items.

Table 3. Mean conformity scores in the three conditions by type of item

	Type of Item			
Condition	Visual	Information	Opinion	Mean
Control	.97	.78	.89	.88
Social Support	.40**	.43**	.59*	.47**
Extreme Dissent	.47**	.42**	.72	.53**

Note: Social Support and Extreme Dissent were compared to Control for each type of item and across items, using the Duncan New Multiple Range Test (Edwards, 1963).

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

EVALUATION OF DISSENTER

To help explain conformity reduction in social support and Extreme Dissent conditions, ratings of the dissenter were obtained in the postexperimental questionnaire. Four 12-point bipolar scales assessed likeableness, intelligence, sincerity, and adjustment. Table 4 shows mean ratings of dissenter given by *S*s who correctly perceived direction of the dissenter's response in the Social Support and Extreme Dissent conditions. Both males and females consistently rated the dissenter more favorably on all four scales in the Social Support condition. Combining data across the four scales and across sex yielded a difference between Social Support and Extreme Dissent significant at less than the .005 level (t = 15.12).

PERSONALITY VARIABLES

To explore individual differences in acceptance of social support, Pearson Product Moment Correlations were computed separately for males and females between mean conformity scores on the three types of items and personality variables in Borgatta's (1965) combined dependency scales. For males, only one correlation attained statistical significance: Social Dependency was negatively correlated with conformity on opinion items ($r = .39$, $p < .10$).

For females, individual differences in acceptance of Social Support were related to a greater number of personality traits than for males. On visual items, both Social Dependency and Directiveness correlated positively with amount of conformity ($r = .51$, $p < .05$ and $r = .36$, $p < .10$, respectively). On opinion items, conformity was positively related to three personality variables: Aloofness ($r = .38$, $p < .10$), Impulsiveness ($r = .61$, $p < .01$), and Tension ($r = .35$, $p < .10$). Thus, some evidence suggests that females who accepted Social Support differed in personality from those who did not.

Table 4. Mean ratings of dissenter in social support and extreme dissent conditions (Data based on *S*s who correctly identified the dissenter in each condition, as shown in Table 1.)

	Ratings of Dissenter			
Condition	Likeableness	Intelligence	Sincerity	Adjustment
Social Support	3.34	3.12	2.83	3.00
Extreme Dissent	8.46	8.55	8.01	8.09

Notes: Lower numbers indicate favorable ratings; e.g., 1 = likeable, 12 = unlikeable.

IV
DISCUSSION

The present study corroborates earlier findings (Allen and Levine, 1966) showing extreme dissent ineffective in reducing conformity on opinion items for both males and females. These results have implications for Asch's explanation of the social support effect. Asch (1955) concluded that breaking the group's consensus is the crucial variable responsible for conformity reduction when a partner (Social Support) is present. The conclusion is very questionable in view of the present finding that one method of breaking group consensus (Extreme Dissent) did *not* invariably decrease conformity. Recall that a dissenter answering even more incorrectly than the erroneous group significantly reduced conformity only on objective items (visual and information). On subjective opinion items, neither males nor females conformed significantly less in the Extreme Dissent than in the Control condition.

Efficacy of Extreme Dissent in reducing conformity only on objective items may be explained in terms of differential implications of group unanimity for objective and subjective material. Lack of consensus on simple objective material may imply that group members are unreliable in making judgments about physical reality. Thus, presence of a Dissenter may cause *S*s to reject the group as a valid referent and to remain independent, as results showed. On subjective opinion items, however, *S*s may not expect uniformity to exist among group members. Therefore, an Extreme Dissenter would not cause rejection of the group as a valid referent on opinions, and *S*s would conform to the group. Turning now to the social support effect, it can be argued that different psychological mechanisms are responsible for the effectiveness of Social Support on subjective, as opposed to objective, material. On opinion items, presence of a partner was required to reduce conformity; merely breaking group consensus by Extreme Dissent was ineffective. Here, then, the crucial factor may be the emotional comfort of having a partner with whom to oppose the group. In addition, other factors, such as liking for the partner and the partner's providing an independent assessment of social reality, may also contribute to conformity reduction in the Social Support condition. It is clear, however, that the role of dissent, per se, is negligible in reducing conformity on opinion items in the Social Support condition.

On objective visual and information items both Extreme Dissent and Social Support significantly decreased conformity. Therefore, breaking the group's unanimity appears to be the crucial variable on objective stimuli, as Asch (1955) suggests. Lack of group consensus—whether produced by Social Support or by Extreme Dissent—may cause the group to be rejected as a valid source of information on objective material.

Sex differences were found on opinion items in the present study. For males, Social Support decreased conformity on all three types of items; for females, Social Support was effective on visual and information items, but not on opinions. Perhaps the females' results can be partially explained by research on coalition formation (Bond and Vinacke, 1961; Vinacke, 1959; Uesugi and Vinacke, 1963). Results of these studies consistently showed that females are concerned with maintaining smooth social interactions ("accomodative" strategy), while males seek to advance their own interests even to the detriment of others ("exploitative" strategy). A general cultural stereotype supports these findings: females in our society are generally expected to be more concerned with social amenities, while males are expected to be more competitive. In the present experiment, perhaps females conformed to the erroneous group on opinion items because of fear that almost total agreement with the partner on critical trials would be interpreted by others as coalition formation detrimental to comfortable group relations.

Explanation of why this effect occurred only on opinion items is needed, however,

since Social Support did significantly reduce conformity on visual and information items for females. It is plausible that *S*s were highly motivated to correctly answer questions with easily verifiable answers; Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballachey (1962) mention "the want to be right" in this regard. In addition, in this study a high percentage of critical trials (60%) were administered on which a partner was present, as compared with an earlier study (Allen and Levine, 1966), and the partner always agreed exactly with *S*s' private judgments. Thus, female *S*s in the Social Support condition were frequently perceived to agree with the partner on visual and information items. Discomfort may have arisen at participating in a divisive coalition on a high percentage of the trials. Therefore, seeking rapprochement with the group, *S*s may have conformed somewhat on subjective opinion items where "the want to be right" was weaker because no single correct answer existed. Complete agreement with the Social Supporter would have resulted in a conformity score of zero. It is interesting that the actual conformity score was .70, indicating a compromise between two opposing sources of influence—the social supporter and the group.

Finally, results showed sex differences in the correlations between personality variables and conformity reduction produced by Social Support. A greater number of significant correlations were found for females than for males. These results seem explicable within the framework of sex-role theory (Beloff, 1958; Lesser and Abelson, 1959). Lesser and Abelson (1959) suggest that correlations between conformity and personality factors are generally stronger for males than for females because conformity among females is primarily determined by sex-role expectations. The feminine sex-role includes submissiveness, avoidance of disagreement, and dependence (Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballachey, 1962; Kagan, 1964). Since conformity behavior is congruent with female sex-role expectations, individual differences in conformity would stem from differences in understanding and accepting sex-role requirements, rather than from personality factors. For males, on the other hand, sex-role expectations stress assertiveness and dominance. Conforming behavior is incongruent with the male sex-role. Hence, differences in conformity among males are more likely to be linked to personality factors.

The sex-role formulation can be extended to behavior in the Social Support condition. Independence is congruent with the male but not with the female sex-role expectations. Therefore, in the Social Support condition, we would expect personality factors to make a greater contribution to the behavioral variance for females than for males. Our data support this contention.

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800 ABSTRACT

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Group consensus was broken either by a partner agreeing exactly with S (Social Support) or by a dissenter giving a response even more incorrect than the group's (Extreme Dissent). Using the Crutchfield apparatus, 157 male and female Ss responded to visual, information, and opinion items. Results disclosed that Extreme Dissent, in comparison with a unanimous group, significantly decreased conformity on visual and information but not on opinion items. Social Support significantly reduced conformity on all three types of items for males, and on visual and information items for females. The results cast doubt on Asch's contention that breaking group consensus, per se, is responsible for the effectiveness of Social Support in reducing conformity.

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